

Reflection Paper: “Sessions One Through Three: Christian Origins”

FAITH EXPERIENCE AND JESUS' LIFE, TEACHINGS AND PARABLES

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XXX-XX-XXXX

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Jesus was a Jewish man who was raised in a Jewish town and died due to the jealousy of Jews and a Roman preoccupation with crushing any perceived rebellion. Jesus challenged many people with his life, teachings and parables. People were challenged in many areas of their lives including their faith, political views and their lust for power and control. Some of the stories of his life and teachings were written down for others to examine and learn from in order to believe that Jesus was the anointed one, sent by God to save all people from their sins, even from themselves. I will explore these areas, my understanding of them and the implications of this understanding for my own experience of faith and ministry.

Bernard Lee explored some aspects of what it would mean to view Jesus as an actual Jew of Galilee in *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus*. This is useful in the study of Jesus and Christianity for it forces we who are so distant from the actual events by time and a very anti-Jewish history to see Jesus as a Jewish man. To place Jesus in a time, place, religion, culture and political situation makes for a more realistic assessment of the meaning of his sayings, teachings and life. More importantly for me, it is also irreplaceable for the contrasts between Greek and Hebrew thought, which came to a head for me in a practical way when Lee explained the difference between how each language understood holiness: “There is more than a semantic difference between (the Greek view of) trying to be holy by not having a sin to confess or (the Hebrew view of) trying to be holy by not letting our sinful propensities put limits on our love (91, parenthetical notes added). Reflection on this one difference shows me how clearly this area of my thinking was underlain by the Greek approach. This was such an illumination for me because trying to live this out is very frustrating and nearly impossible for me to do. The Hebrew

understanding, in contrast, strikes a cord within me. I do not have to be a Spartan to live as God commands! I believe this change of understanding will enable the living out of it better.

Robert Ludwig explores the teachings of Jesus in the parables, proverbs and the Lord's Prayer (22), inasmuch as these can be traced to Jesus himself (36). By illustrating variations on the Good Samaritan story (25), he shows clearly how these parables of Jesus turn upside down the expected ending. Ludwig's own example yields the same result. An example of this can be seen in the movie *Good Morning Vietnam* which allows the Vietcong to speak in its own voice and is a kind of parable in allowing the enemy to be humanized, for this is what a parable does. Ludwig states that the proverbs as Jesus uses them "function like one line parables (34)." Many of Jesus' sayings, like those in Matthew 5:39-41, are not natural ways of being human. They instead turn world-views upside down, like G.K. Chesterton's description of Saint Francis of Assisi (Ch 5), standing on his head, as it were, so that the meaning of everything in the world was changed. Except for the grace of God, the buildings would fall down to the sky! Luke Johnson points out these parables are used to attack, defend, clarify and mystify (133). In other words, they are used, in the extreme, to deconstruct one world view and construct another. Yet a parable is not only told, but also lived. This is illustrated in the parable God has told of my life, leaving and returning to the Church. On the down side, I became a noxious anti-Catholic, changing from a good, quiet, humble man into an evil, loud, proud man. On the other side, I learned to love scripture, pray and go to Church. My world-view has been molded, shattered and refashioned through this process of parable.

This brings out the purpose of the parable, to enable one to think outside the box and possess one's own existence. In both examples above, the Jews and the Americans hated the Samaritans and Vietcong, respectively. The people were taught this emotionally repugnant attitude so that they would live in a certain way. Parable is a good remedy to following the masses. Because of this, parable can sometimes be a very dangerous tool, causing a person to rethink and reappropriate thoughts, opinions and attitudes. This danger includes the possibility that those in power might lose it if many thought the same way. This instantly puts those who follow this way of parable in danger, considering the long history of those in power suppressing and killing those who do not tow the line and think differently. This explains clearly why the leaders of the Jews would want to kill Jesus. His use of parable was freeing the person to think for the self which was changing the relationship with their leaders. People who can think clearly and independently are a perceived threat (and at times an actual threat) to those in power. Jesus could not be manipulated or tricked by the Jewish leaders. I believe they feared they could not manipulate the people after they learned to think for themselves. While questioning the power holders and power structure is healthy to a point, it can begin to break down the stability of a community.

The Lord's Prayer is an interesting teaching of Jesus. This is spiced up by the fact that both passages that we find this teaching in are distinctly different (Mt 6:9-13 and Lk 11:2-4). In the Matthean passage, Jesus talks for nearly three chapters, five through seven. It appears that Matthew was intending on providing as many of Jesus' teachings as he could through what I would call the literary device of "the gift of gab." The Lukan passage is written as something more imaginable, an event that actually could have

happened. The disciples see Jesus praying and ask him to teach them. This makes the authenticity of the passage believable, yet in no way can it be construed that because of this observation the Matthean passage is inauthentic.

As Luke Johnson points out many times in *The Writings of the New Testament*, everything comes to be through interpretation. Being human, I cannot learn without processing it through my own understanding and experiences. This provides me with a relatively new way of viewing sacred scripture. I have viewed the scriptures most of my life as a more or less literal recording of the happenings they contain, like a news story. We did not, as Catholics, study the Bible as Protestants did. Being taught the scientific method and growing up in this Joe Friday, 'just the facts,' world have conditioned me to expect this of any writing. This was accentuated when I left the Church and became a Fundamentalist anti-Catholic. I now understand the scriptures as literature written to tell the story to assist us in a growing understanding of our faith. Viewing Jesus as a Jew, I appreciate more accurately and deeply the original meanings intended by the authors.

The understanding I have gained in exploring the idea of parable is that, knowing its mechanics, how it works, I am freer to think as my own person. This is important to me because of my own faith experience in leaving my Catholic Church. A defense mechanism I used to ensure I would not be misled again was to read voraciously everything under the sun I could get my hands on concerning Church teaching and the writings and lives of the saints. My plan was the next time someone came to try and thrust upon me the 'good news of anti-Catholicism,' I would attack with a presentation calculated to destroy the underpinnings of their faith. This discovery of parable frees me affectively to be a more effective minister to those I encounter, as scripture records:

“Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear. And since fear has to do with punishment, love is not yet perfect in one who is afraid” (I Jn 5:18). My discovery through this paper is that I can actually start to love Protestants and Catholics. This will make my ministry much more effective. I need to provide those I work with a lived example of what it means to love, as Jesus commanded (Jn 13:34).

It is significant for me that Jesus was a Jew and that he most likely thought like the people of his time. In the discovery that the Greek and Hebrew understandings of life were so markedly disparate, I am not afraid to question why I understand life the way I do. My life has been significantly enhanced by the experience I had in reading Lee’s first of three volumes as outlined. My ministry in teaching and sponsoring people in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (people considering becoming Catholic) will be changed as a direct result of this class. I will be much more careful concerning scripture about what I say and how I say it. I can use parable to illustrate the concept of conversion and to show that an examined faith is worth more than gold or precious stones.

As I peered into the Lord’s Prayer, I learned that I have not critically examined much of scripture. I have read the gospels’ hundreds of times, yet the force with which I was hit in the comparison of the Matthean and Lukan passages made me feel as if I had blinders on until now. I never noticed that Matthew must have been intending to fill pages with as much of Jesus’ teaching as he could remember while the author sat Jesus on the hill to teach the crowds. This discovery in sacred scripture leaves my whistle whetted but not quenched! I cannot imagine myself teaching before critically examining passages as thoroughly as I can. Reflection upon my approach to people and scripture in light of the reading and the probing questions this paper forced me to face squarely have

given me a new appreciation for both. This invigorated understanding will affect my approach to my own faith and the way in which I minister.

Works Cited

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